

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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PETRARCH.

(1304-1374.)

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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PETRARCH.

BY THE EDITOR.

ITALY will celebrate this year, on July 20th, the six hundredth anniversary of the birthday of one of her greatest sons, Francesco di Petrarca, poet, humanist, patriot, whose personality is typically Italian and has become an ideal and a prophetic prototype for later generations.

The original form of the poet's family name was Petracco, which, for the sake of euphony, was changed to the Latinised form Petrarca, and in English has been shortened to Petrarch.

In speaking of Petrarch we must remember, that, being born in 1304, he still lived in the Middle Ages and his striking characteristic consists in the modern cast of his mind which distinguished him personally and made him, prophetlike, anticipate both the rise of humanism and the national ideals of the Italian people.

Contemplating the grandeur of ancient Rome, Petrarch dreamed of the greatness of the Italian nation and he exclaimed:

"Unite, Italia, and dare once more be free!"

Petrarch was born at Arezzo, where his parents had taken refuge during a civil war, exiled from their native city Florence, then the most powerful and opulent city of Italy. His mother, when allowed to return to the Florentine republic, settled in Incisa, a little village on the Arno above Florence, where she spent seven years with her two children, for she gave birth to a second boy, Gherardo, in 1307. In 1312 the father, a lawyer, removed to Pisa and thence, in 1313, to Avignon, the seat of the exiled Popes and the center, not only of the Christian Church, but also of all the luxuries and opulence of the times.

From his childhood Francesco was an admirer of the ancient

classical authors, especially the Latin poets, Ovid and Virgil, but at the age of fifteen, yielding to his father's wish, he studied law, first at Montpellier (1319-1323) and then at Bologna (1323-1326). On the death of his father he returned to Avignon, and here, on the 6th day of April, 1326, the youth saw in the Church of Santa Clara a beautiful lady, Laura, who impressed him so deeply that ever afterwards she continued to exercise an indelible and decisive influence upon his life and poetry.

Literary critics are even now in doubt whether the figure of Laura was a real person or mere fiction, but a descendant of Laura, the Abbé de Sade, has undertaken the task of definitely settling the



LAURA.

problem by proving the identity of the poet's love with the daughter of Audibert di Nova, wife of Hugo de Sade, a beautiful and distinguished lady, noble both in birth and in mind, whom the arduous poet loved, or rather worshipped, with a rare and fervid infatuation, for she remained to him forever unapproachable, like a star in the sky, or the Virgin Madonna of the Catholic Church.

Though we accept the contention that Laura actually existed, and though Petrarch had been enraptured by her appearance in a real encounter and was carried away by a love at first sight, we may still claim that the greater part of Laura's picture as we find it in the *Sonnets*, is the product of the poet's enthusiasm, who had lit-

the opportunity to become totally acquainted with her and fed his unrequited love at a distance mainly upon the fancies of his own heart.

After Petrarch's *Lehrjahre* (1304-1326), his *Wanderjahre* began, the period in which his character was formed and the foundation laid for his fame as a poet (1327-1337).

At Avignon Petrarch had become acquainted with Giacomo Colonna, who had just been installed by the Pope as Bishop to Lombez at the foot of the Pyrenees in Southern France, and he extended to the young poet an invitation to join him as a kind of secretary and travelling companion, which invitation was cheerfully accepted.



AVIGNON.

Petrarch took orders, but he never held any high position in the Church.

Petrarch was of a restless nature and could never stay for any length of time in one place. He grew restless at Lombez and undertook a longer journey, which brought him to Paris, Ghent, Liege, Cologne and also to Rome, and everywhere he met the most prominent scholars and leading men of the age.

Among the friends of Petrarch we note one, Ludovico, a learned German philosopher, whom the poet in his writings addresses as "Socrates," and another, a native of Rome, by the name of Lelo, whom he calls "Laelius."

Petrarch was a lover of books, and he planned to establish a great library, for which he deemed Venice to be the best place. The Venetian government gladly accepted his offer and received him with hospitality and great honor as a guest of the city. But Petrarch was much embittered by the infidelity of the young Venetians, who were followers of Averroes, and when he rebuked "those freethinkers who have a great contempt for Christ and His apostles as well as for all those who would not bow the knee to the Stagyrite," they retorted on him by a mock trial which they had publicly enacted in order to criticise his philosophical and religious views. The



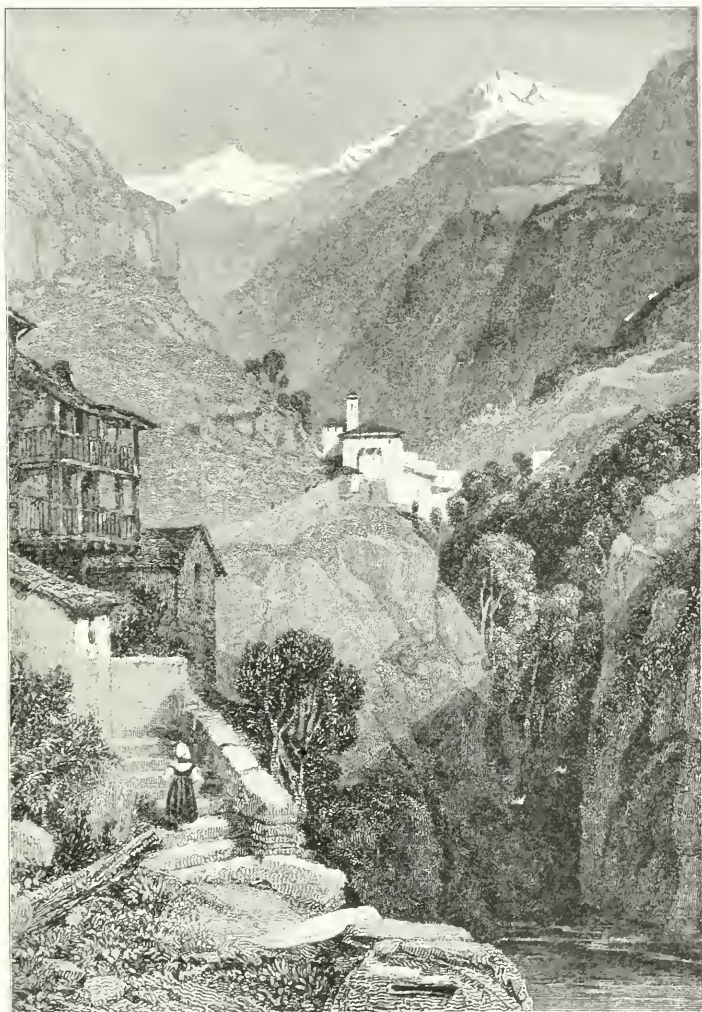
LIBRARY OF ST. MARK, ON ST. MARK'S PLACE, VENICE*.

judges of the farcical proceeding returned a verdict that Petrarch was "a good man," but, added they ironically, "he was illiterate!"

Having returned to Avignon in 1337, Petrarch settled in Vaucluse, a secluded spot situated about fifteen miles from the city, where he made his home for several years, devoting himself to literary labors. To this period belongs the poet's relation to a woman whose name for unknown reasons he has concealed with as much scrupulous care as he has extolled the name of Laura. Two children were born to Petrarch, a son, Giovanni, in 1337, and a daughter, Francesca, in 1343. Both of them were adopted by the father and at his request, legitimised by the Pope.

* The tower on the right has fallen during the last year.

In the year 1341 Petrarch visited the court of King Robert of Naples, and at the initiative of this sovereign was crowned as poet-



VAUCLUSE*.

laureate at the Capitol of Rome under the applause of the Roman people.

* This picture, as well as the others of this article (with the exception of the sketch made by Petrarch), including the portraits of Petrarch and Laura, are reproduced from *The Sonnets, Triumphs, and Other Poems of Petrarch*, by Thomas Campbell.

Rome in the meantime became the seat of great political disturbances, and Cola di Rienzi, who, with all his noble traits, was a visionary demagogue, succeeded in establishing what he fondly thought to be a restoration of the Republic of Rome, but which actually was a mob-licensed tyranny, governed by him under the modest title of "Tribune." Petrarch supported Rienzi's cause, but could not prevent the final collapse of his short reign.

In 1348 Laura died of the plague on the same date on which the poet had seen her first, April 6th.



SKETCH OF VAUCLUSE BY PETRARCH'S OWN HAND*.

The words underneath the picture read as follows: "*Transalpina solitudo mea iocundissima*," which means, "my most delightful transalpine retreat." Petrarch drew this picture on his copy of Pliny's *Natural History*, in remembrance of the pleasant hours which he had spent at Vacluse.

The poet received the news of Laura's death at Selva Piana, and he wrote the following marginal note upon his copy of Virgil, which is still preserved and is by good authority regarded as unquestionably authentic:

"Laura, illustrious for her virtues, and for a long time cele-

* Petrarch's sketch has been impressed on the cover of *Petrarch, the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, by Robinson and Rolfye, and is here reproduced by the courtesy of the publishers, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, London.

brated in my verse, for the first time appeared to my eyes on the 6th of April, 1327, in the church of St. Clara, at the first hour of



SELVA PIANA, NEAR PARMA.



ROME.

Showing the dome of St. Peter at the distance and the Castle of St. Angelo to the right.

the day. I was then in my youth. In the same city, and at the same hour, in the year 1348, this luminary disappeared from our world.

I was then at Verona, ignorant of my wretched situation. Her chaste and beautiful body was buried the same day, after vespers, in the Church of Cordeliers. Her soul returned to its native mansion in Heaven. I have written this with a pleasure mixed with bitterness, to retrace the melancholy remembrance of 'MY GREAT LOSS.' This loss convinces me that I have nothing now left worth living for, since the strongest cord of my life is broken. By the grace of God, I shall easily renounce a world where my hopes have been vain and perishing. It is time for me to fly from Babylon when the knot that bound me to it is untied."

A new period begins for Petrarch. His love for Laura is less



MILAN CATHEDRAL.

passionate and more religious; he is more resigned, bestowing great praise upon monastic life and solitude. He had been appointed Canon of Parma in 1346, which he had visited ever since from time to time. He now, in 1348, accepted an invitation of the Archbishop Giovanni, Viscount of Milan, who was practically the tyrant of that city. In 1350 he became Archdeacon of Parma.

Finally Petrarch retired to Arquà, a little village in the Euganean Hills, about twelve miles south of Parma, where he continued to devote himself to his favorite studies and poetical composition, and there he was found dead on July 18th, 1374, among the books of his library.

Petrarch's last will requests his friends not to weep for his

death because tears do no good to the dead but may harm the living. He only asks for prayers and alms to the poor, leaving all details of the funeral to his friends, adding: "What signifies it to me where my body is laid?" He makes bequests in favor of religious orders and leaves an endowment for an anniversary mass which is still celebrated on the 9th of July. Among his gifts to personal friends is one of fifty gold florins to Boccaccio "for to buy him a warm coat for his studies at night." He appoints Francesco da Bassano of Milan his heir for the purpose of paying out one half of his fortune "to the person to whom it is assigned"—who is commonly supposed to be Petrarch's daughter, Francesca. His brother, Gherardo, the Carthusian monk, is offered an option of either one hundred florins payable at once or ten florins every year.

Though Petrarch had taken an active part in the political history of his time, he was a poet and rhetorician, not a hero and a character. His scholarship, the elegance of his verses, and his amiable personality endeared him to both the aristocratic men of his time and the common people of Italy. Far from being a man of definite and consistent ideals, his life is full of contradictions. Mediæval in thought and principle, he was modern in sentiment. Though an Italian patriot, he invited the German Emperor to continue the Ghibelline policy of imperial interference with Italian affairs. Though an admirer of the classics, he knew no Greek: "he was deaf to Homer as Homer was dumb to him." Though a humanist, he was a devout adherent to the most mediæval forms of Christianity. Though an enthusiastic champion of the cause of liberty, he was an intimate friend of almost all of the tyrants of his time and was instrumental in their retaining their power and usurped privileges. Though indebted to the Colonnas for many personal favors, he became an abettor of the Roman mob who massacred seven members of that noble family of Rome. Rome is to him once the eternal city, and then the impious Babylon. Though he refused lucrative positions of high duties and honor (such as secretaryship to the Pope and the rectorship of the University of Florence) in order to preserve his independence, he practically lived upon favors from the powerful as their retainer and so remained all his life dependent upon their benevolence. All these and other traits would have been fatal to any man but him who in the "vanity fair" of his poetical fancies, was little conscious of his inconsistencies. His very shortcomings seem to have added to the charm of his personality and made it possible that while he was still a child of the Middle Ages, he became one of the founders of modern Italy.